Although Christine Edwards had yet to finish her second year of law school, she pursued a position on Dean Witter’s all-attorney governmental affairs staff in Washington, D.C. A savvy investor who understood fully the delicate balance between risk and return, she put her job on the line to secure her immediate hiring.

“Part of the deal was they could fire me if I didn’t complete law school and pass the Maryland and D.C. bar exams within two years,” she explains. Failure wasn’t part of her plan, however, and the return on Edwards’ investment grew from an entry-level staff position to a ranking in-house lawyer for a $21 billion financial services company.

For someone who chose the law as an alternate career, Edwards enjoys tremendous success. When she left the University of Maryland in the mid-’70s armed with a degree in education but facing a soft job market for English teachers, Edwards began her march through the ranks of Dean Witter Financial Services Group. An ardent goal setter, Edwards mapped out a plan to pursue her dream of earning a law degree. In 1981, halfway through the law school’s evening program, she took that pivotal first step into the governmental affairs arena that led her to one of the pre-eminent legal positions within the financial services industry. Today, more than a year after a trend-setting merger between Morgan Stanley and Dean Witter, Discover & Co., she reigns as the first woman general counsel of one of Wall Street’s largest firms.
“When people make substantial contributions to the decision-making process they feel ownership in the decisions that are made.”

Edwards brought more than 20 years of financial and legal experience, including seven years as general counsel for Dean Witter, Discover, to the coveted position. She notes that lessons learned during her career served her well during the transition. “I’m not sure any of us knew what to expect after the merger,” she says. “We knew there would be huge challenges and huge opportunities, and both have occurred in the past year since the merger closed.”

Edwards divides her time between New York and Riverwoods, Ill., a Chicago suburb, and stays connected electronically to her worldwide staff of 500, which includes 200 lawyers. Edwards credits much of her success to hiring the right people and keeping them motivated. “I really involve the senior lawyers who report to me in decision-making and thought processes,” she notes. “When people make substantial contributions to the decision-making process, they feel ownership in the decisions that are made.”

Success also hinges on her genuine affection for her job and the people with whom she works. “I truly like the people who work in the law, compliance and governmental affairs division. They’re fun to work with and it’s a fortunate environment for me,” she says. Although some might assume that Edwards has reached the pinnacle of her career, she continues to set goals for herself and her staff. In the short term, Edwards intends to incorporate a fully integrated law, compliance and governmental affairs effort for the firm. Travel to far-flung international offices also takes priority as she meets face-to-face with staff members to understand their individual issues of concern.

“My long-term goal is to continue to build the tremendous reputation that this department has, which in turn augments the reputation of the firm,” she states. “It’s an exciting time for the industry and an exciting time for women in this industry. It’s a fascinating area of the law and with the attention focused on firms like ours, I’ve never seen a more stimulating time than this.”

Evidence is an extremely disciplined area of the law and you never forget the discipline of the thought process.